



## COMMENT

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# Archaeological destruction

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**ABSTRACT** With the growth of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the world is being forced to contemplate if there is any way we can ever comprehensively prevent cultural heritage of international significance falling into the hands of terrorists. The international community also has to consider the uncomfortable truth that how we handle the current crisis will send a clear message to the next group of extremists: Will the message be one of strength or impotence?

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“There can be little doubt” wrote Flood in 2002 “that the recent destruction of the monumental rock-cut Buddhas at Bamiyan by the former Taliban government of Afghanistan will define ‘Islamic iconoclasm’ in the popular imagination for several decades to come” (641). Yet barely a month ago in September 2015 I was driven home from a BBC radio interview on the destruction of the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra by a taxi driver who commented sadly, “It happened in my country too. The Taliban destroyed our Buddhas”. His surprise that I knew the story of Bamiyan was as heartbreaking as it was ironic given the circumstances, and led me to reflect on the fact that what is happening in Syria and Iraq is not a new phenomenon and yet the media and world politicians seem to be trying to convince us that this is in some way an unprecedented assault on World Heritage. Why? Have we learned nothing since the events of 2001 or is it that the world was somehow irrevocably changed on 9/11 and there is no going back?

The first answer is that yes in some respects the world has irrevocably changed. It may be a surprise to realize that the biggest change to impact on issues of archaeological destruction is the advent of social media. For the first time brave “citizen journalists” armed only with a smartphone have been cataloguing human rights abuses and attacks on cultural heritage as they happen and uploading the evidence to social media profiles or posting videos on YouTube. There has been a flurry of social media comment<sup>1</sup> over the ubiquity of the smartphone among the refugees fleeing to Europe over the Summer demonstrating an alarming lack of knowledge about life in the Middle East, notably a total ignorance of the fact that Syria and Iraq have traditionally had large well-educated urban middle classes who possess such items for the same reasons that the average banker, lawyer or doctor has them in London or Manchester .... And that is without factoring in the advertising that means that every teenager wants to own the latest gadget. These devices mean that for the first time the destruction is being reported “in real time” and the rest of the world is being made aware of these events at least within a day or two of the destruction occurring.

In previous conflicts we could only wait for the information that the aggressor chose to share with the outside world, as with the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas, or damage could not be quantified or assessed at all until the hostilities finally ceased and postwar reconstruction teams arrived on the ground. This means that the world’s cultural heritage practitioners now find themselves in limbo and curiously impotent. They can watch the destruction unfold before their very eyes on news bulletins and IS-issued propaganda videos, but there is nothing they can actually do to intervene and stop the destruction.<sup>2</sup> So where do we go from here?

One suggestion is that we stop commenting and endlessly analysing these orgies of destruction in public. In a thoughtful recent article on the subject, Harmanşah (2015) has suggested that the slickly staged videos of destruction with stirring Islamic chants in the background should be viewed more as performative acts than a source of information to be analysed by cultural heritage specialists:

I would like us to treat the ISIS videos not as items of archival resource, something to be mined for objective information, but as *artifacts of ideological discourse*, which will then allow us to question their documentary status. By doing this, we can also challenge the video’s documentary status by pointing out its performative character. (Harmanşah, 2015: 173)

His contention is that by watching these images and commenting on them over and over again through media

outlets we are giving IS the oxygen of publicity that will ensure that they repeat the act. This point of view is persuasive as so far all evidence suggests that IS are a reactive rather than a reflective entity and it seems that, like a sulky small child, they perpetrate each atrocity when interest in them begins to wane in the hope of provoking more comment and condemnation on the world stage.

At this point it is time to address the elephant in the room and acknowledge that a large proportion of contemporary discourse relating to issues of archaeological destruction is dominated by the prevalent cultural trope of a “clash of civilizations” and the inevitable change of the world order. The work of Fukuyama and the response to his 1989 essay by Huntingdon (Fukuyama, 1989; Huntingdon, 1993) in the decade before the turn of the millennium was already facilitating a discourse that posited some cataclysmic millennial clash when the world was shaken by the events of 9/11. Somewhat controversially I would argue that, apart from those who lived through those events that day at first hand and the families and friends of those who survived and those who tragically did not, those who suffered most from the fallout of that day were people living in vast swathes of the Muslim-majority world. I phrase it like this deliberately because I was living in a monastery in the Syrian desert in 2001 and we did not hear what had happened until the following day; immediately on hearing the news my Syrian (Christian) friends began to fear this terrorist act would be used as a provocation to attack them and, in a way, they have been justified in this belief.

This brings me to my point; since 9/11 Islamophobia has become almost socially acceptable in a manner that racism, gender discrimination or homophobia is not in the Western world. This has brought about a certain bandying around of “facts” about Islam that are widely accepted but never properly questioned or attributed to a definitive source. It has also led to a de-humanization of Arabs in particular, so that people of Arab origin are rarely viewed as being of individual nationalities, tribe or creed, and there is certainly no acknowledgement that not all Arabs are Muslim. Therefore the scenes currently coming out of Syria and Iraq of archaeological destruction tend to be dismissed with sentiments suggesting that we should expect no better from Arabs/Muslims because, and here is the crux of the matter, *Islam forbids all figurative imagery as idolatrous*. This statement has been repeated *ad nauseam* and is now accepted without question yet:

... traditional Muslim culture did not possess a doctrine about the arts, neither formal thought-out rejections of certain kinds of creative activities nor positive notions about the possible instructional or beautifying values of the various existing techniques of art. At best one can assume that the doctrines and ways of life characteristic of early Islam may have directed the culture toward channeling its artistic activities in certain doctrines rather than in others. (Grabar, 1987: 74)

Grabar, who died in 2011, is regarded as one of the greatest scholars of Islamic art, and having spent a life studying its origins he could state with some authority that:

... little of the literary documentation we possess is earlier than the ninth century and by then many classical features of the new Muslim artistic tradition had already been created. (Grabar, 1987: 73)

In other words, there was no fixed prohibition of images in Islam in the formative centuries of the religion and it should not

be forgotten that Islam was evolving at the very time that the Christians of the Byzantine Empire were turning on their own sacred icons (726–843); therefore early Muslims may have been strongly influenced by the Christian rhetoric being employed to justify the banning of sacred imagery.

What is clear is that figurative imagery in mosques was never acceptable, suggesting that Christian iconoclasm may have had a significant influence on early Islamic religious art or it could have simply been that, as with the other two monotheistic religions, there was an uneasiness that figurative imagery could lead down a path to idolatry. On the other hand, attitudes to figurative imagery outside the religious sphere are far more complex and even attitudes to sculpture were not uniformly negative in the early years of Islam (King, 2002).

This means that it is lazy and incorrect to assert that *all* Muslims are against *all* figurative imagery when the reality of the situation is, as with most things in life, far more nuanced and complex than a blanket ban. It is also wrong to assert that this is the product of a Sunni–Shia divide. Take for instance the Umayyad frescoes of the Qusayr ‘Amra palace/bath house in Jordan where images of naked women bathing and topless dancing girls gyrating to musical accompaniment have never caused significant offence (Fowden, 2004) versus the comparative imagery of dancing girls and lovers that was defaced in the music room of the ‘Ali Qapu in Isfahan during the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979.<sup>3</sup> The lesson is that context is all, and the appropriateness of an image or otherwise is what has concerned commentators, more than an outright prohibition.

Returning to the barbarous practices of IS we need to understand that the rise of the movement is associated with radical changes within Islam itself and is not simply to be taken as a merely anti-Western stance. However, as with all fundamentalist impulses within religion, there is a belief that the faith in its purest form was that practiced at the time of its origins, in this case the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, and there is a skewed and simplistic reading of what that lifestyle entailed. Put simply the vast majority of radical Islamists are ill educated as to the origins of their faith and ignorant of the sophisticated discourse of the Middle Ages when the Arab World led the globe in scientific and philosophical enquiry. Apart from their holy texts they appear to be relying on contemporary polemics by radical preachers that distort the teachings of the great Islamic scholars of the past. This is not to say that Islam is alone in this; Christianity is just as strongly to blame if we take the media *furor* every time a “new gospel” is “discovered” as indicative of this phenomenon. Variant recensions of Christian texts are no secret and have been around as long as the religion, and yet there is often a disproportionate reaction to such announcements suggesting that many Christians are relatively untutored in the true origins of their faith.

So where does this leave us with regard to the images we are currently seeing of the destruction of priceless archaeological artefacts in the media? Well first of all we need to make clear that they are “priceless” in the sense of what they can teach us about our shared human past and because they are irreplaceable. They are not priceless in the sense of being worth vast sums of cash. Looting is undeniably a major problem in the Middle East at the moment, but aside from the very highest quality items most people would be surprised to learn how little most archaeological artefacts are worth in material terms. Toning down the hyperbole in relation to the material worth of antiquities and being realistic about the fact that unprovenanced items are never going to be a sound financial investment is perhaps the best way to derail the trade; after all

it is powered by greed and to point out that looted objects are not valuable on an open market may be enough to deter all but the most unashamedly amoral buyer.

More importantly perhaps we should stop dignifying these orgies of destruction with the fig leaf of religious justification by reporting them as an Islamic act repudiating *shirk* (idolatry, polytheism). They are, as Harmanşah has perceptively pointed out, performative acts designed to grab attention rather than acts of religious piety. They may also be planned to cover the tracks of their looting—if the *cella* of the Temple of Bel is blown to smithereens we assume the beautifully carved reliefs that stood at its entrance have also been destroyed, but they could now be safely installed in a basement gallery in Jeddah, Doha or even London.

In short this is criminal behaviour on all levels and by trying to justify these events as a religious act by an extremist organization we are attributing to them a significance and ritual justification that is simply not justified and which is offensive in its assumptions about Muslim culture. Cultural heritage experts have a duty to speak out and to keep this in the public eye as, if we allow these events to pass unremarked, it will be even easier for the next group of depraved murderers to get away with it. On the other hand, we must not dignify these events with a long theological and psychological justification for why they are happening. Monuments are being destroyed for the same reason that people are being brutally murdered; to shock and provoke a reaction. In fact these two strands were recently tragically linked with the horrific murder of Khaled Al-Asad in Tadmor. To honour his memory and that of the others like him who have paid the ultimate price for trying to defend irreplaceable archaeological heritage we all have a duty to speak out, but what we must never do is glamorize or romanticize, and certainly never seek to offer a coherent explanation for, the acts of cultural nihilism perpetrated by IS and its ilk.

## Notes

- 1 See <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/surprised-that-syrian-refugees-have-smartphones-well-sorry-to-break-this-to-you-but-youre-an-idiot-10489719.html>, accessed 27 September 2015, and <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/11/how-smart-phones-are-helping-refugees-in-europe.html>, accessed 27 September 2015, for just two of the many articles that appear when the words “refugee” and “smartphone” are typed into a search engine.
- 2 See the statements by the head of UNESCO Irina Bokova on <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1341>, accessed 27 September 2015. Scrolling down to the bottom of the page will reveal a long list of related statements condemning similar acts, all of which were picked up by media outlets but which have failed to achieve any tangible outcome.
- 3 Dr Behnam Pedram, Former Dean of the Faculty of Conservation of the Art University of Isfahan, personal communication.

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**Additional Information**

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